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Kangri Garpo Lhagu Glacier – Gongyada 6423m (left), Zeh 6126m (right) east face

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SECRETS ON THE *MAPS*

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Tamotsu (Tom) Nakamura

“Today the map has no more secrets.”



Kangri Garpo East, Lhagu Glacier – Gongyada 6423m (left). Zeh 612m (right) east face

Environment science professor Mauri Pelto reports that Lhagu Glacier retreated 1.2 kilo- meters since 2001.

Melting water from Tibetan Glacier feeds rivers that supply water to 1.3 billion people in Asia. In a 2015 statement, Dalai Lama spoke of the need for climate change action for “survival of humanity” and environmental protection on the Tibetan Plateau, for the sake of “the environmental health and sustainability of the entire world”.

“Idle minds repeat that parrot phrase. But who knows all Tibet, or its far-away frontier on western China.”

The Austrian-American explorer Joseph Rock wrote these words in a 1930 article for *National Geographic*, four years before I was born. Some would convince themselves that encounters with veiled mountains are an experience in the past, there are vast and complex topographies in the Greater Ranges that hold countless peaks. Many of these summits will remain enigmas for generations. I grew up in Tokyo, Japan, surrounded by increasingly tall buildings as the city rebuilt after the war. At Hitotsubashi University, I studied commerce and accounting. At age eighteen, however, my life began to change. I joined the mountaineering club and started climbing in the Japanese Alps. Although these well-traveled summits were fewer than 4000m high, in summer, their steep rock faces flashed in the sun, in winter, their slopes transformed into a glittering realm of white drifts and bitter cold. Still, as I read about much bigger ranges abroad, I became overwhelmed by thoughts of all the mighty peaks I'd never seen. In 1961, I went on an expedition to make first ascents in Bolivia and Peru, where I encountered wild snow fluting and chaotic glacial ice, crisp and surreal in the thin, Andean air. Afterward, I kept venturing overseas in search of other enticing mountains. I came across Joseph Rock's article in 1989 and began to wonder the “secrets” that remained on distant mountaintops. A year later, I visited Lijiang in Yunnan Province for the first time. There, I was deeply touched by the allure of the snowy peaks and by the aspects of traditional culture that the local Naxi people had managed to preserve. In the Yulong Naxi Autonomous County, the sacred Jade Dragon Snow Mountain (“Yulong Xueshan” in Chinese or “Satseto” in Naxi language) dazzled white and silver against the sky.



Yaks descending from Meila Shan Pass (5018m), Sichuan-Tibet Highway in late October

In a 2018 talk at the University of Sydney, Kyinzom Dhougue stated that Tibetan “nomads are the stewards of the lands” and “at the forefront of climate change”. They face the impacts of losing their grasslands and traditional way of life amid the effects of industrial development, mining, hydropower projects, some government conservation initiatives, and climate change.



Qungmo Kangri 7048m east face viewed at Xugu La 5300m, Nyainqentanglha West (Qungmo Kangri was first climbed by a Chinese Korean team in 1996. Many of the peaks in the surrounding area remain unclimbed)

I still regret that I had no chance to climb in this massif. Only one team had made a recorded ascent of its highest point, 5596-meter Shanzidou. In the *American Alpine Journal* Eric S. Perlman, who summited with Phil Peralta-Ramos in 1987, recalled struggling through thick bamboo forests and up “snow-splattered limestone headwalls”, where axes broke through layers of ice too fragile for any protection. Clouds enveloped them near the top, and they never saw the view. To me, the peaks appeared like a galaxy, containing nebulous worlds of untouched stone and snow. I thought about all the intricate corners where no one had set foot—and then I realized that this was only one mysterious range among many.

This encounter was the beginning of my odysseys through less-frequented mountains of China and Tibet, journeys that would continue for thirty years. As I traveled beyond Yunnan and Sichuan and into eastern Tibet. I realized that Joseph Rock' words still resonated with me: there were, indeed, many “secrets” from the maps—including innumerable unclimbed 6000-meter peaks in the Gorge Country of Yunnan and in the regions of Kangri Garpo and Nyainqentanglha East.

Many of these summits were then scarcely known to the international climbing community. Since photography was my hobby, I decided to take pictures of the mountains, so I could introduce them to alpinists around the world. In 2016, when I published my book, *East of the Himalaya*, I listed some fifty untrodden peaks along the border between China and Bhutan, twenty-five along the McMahon Line between Tibet and India, ten in Goikarla Rigyu and south of the Yarlung Tsangpo, two hundred in the Nyainqentanglha East region, forty in Kangri Garpo, twenty in the Gorge Country, ten in the West Sichuan highlands and forty in the Tanggula Shan.

“I have never had any sponsors or financiers. This has allowed me a free hand, but not always made it easy publish my work. My journeys of discovery through eastern Tibet have provided me with a second life after retirement. While I am way too old to climb all these untouched peaks.....I see myself more as a source for other mountaineers. I provided information, maps, photos and knowledge freely to anyone interested in the region.”—Tamotsu Nakamura, Post Magazine



Unclimbed Tiba Kangri 6846m west face west of Namcha Barwa 7782m



Buddhist monk at the Litang Monastery creates traditional sand mandara with the aid of a *chakpur*, a narrow metal funnel filled with sand.



Gyala Peri 7294m, north face: First climbed by Himalayan Association of Japan via south ridge in 1986



Unclimbed west face of Namcha Barwa 7782m, a peak first climbed by a Japanese Chinese team in 1992.



The south face of unclimbed Gongyada 6423m above the Lhagu Glacier in Kangri Garpo East



Nyainqentanglha East, showing an unclimbed 6000-meter peak. In *East of the Himalaya*, Nakamura wrote: “Once off the beaten tracks, you will come across unfrequented stunning peaks and magnificent glaciers,” particularly in “the central part north of the upper Yi’ong Tsangpo in Nyainqentanglha Esst.” Nonetheless, he added, many peaks in Tibet and nearby borderlands “are not opened to foreigners and not easy to approach because of geopolitical backgrounds.” Other summits are closed for spiritual reasons. He recalls, “My experiences overseas during a quarter century---drove me to introduce such fascinating peaks to the international mountaineering community.”

At the same time, these regions are transforming rapidly. In Tibet the change is taking place even faster than I’d imagined. New department store and shopping malls crowd the holy city of Lhasa. Potala Palace is lighted up. Many of buildings have been torn down as the Chinese government modernizes the city. Throughout the countryside, the network of highways and railways grows ever more extensive. With the rise of Chinese tourism, hotels spring up in scenic towns. Old frontier no longer exist—at least in the way that I’d imagined them as a young man.

In the autumn of 2019, I decided to return to the mountain range of Kangri Garpo, a place still hardly known outside of the region although tourism development is now about to begin. Here, the summits stretch about 280 kilometers from northwest to southwest, starting east of 7782-meter Namcha Barwa and the Great Tsangpo Bend, one of the most formidable canyons in the world, and extending to the mountain chain of

Baxoila Lin and the western end of the Hengduan Mountains. Some forty 6000-meter peaks and many 5000-meter mountains soar into the sky. Almost all these peaks are unclimbed.

By then, I was eighty-four years old. Professor Kazuo Kakihara, who would join me, had turned seventy-one. Our Tibetan guide Awang (Kedup Geltsen) was a young forty-one. Awang has been my most reliable expedition partner since 2009. He was a former monk who learned English and who has begun operating a shop near the Potala Palace. The best navigator I know, he is intimately familiar with all regions of Tibet. Our Tibetan driver on this trip, Ge Nei, age forty, also knew the road conditions thoroughly. We were fortunate to have their help.

Year by year, government control over foreign visitors has become stricter in the Tibet Autonomous Region. It took us three months to get permits, after applying to the Tourist Bureau, Public Security Bureau (PSB), Legal Department, Army and Border Police. Even so, we encountered many checkpoints among our journey. But a six-kilometer tunnel now leads under the most dangerous landslide of the Sichuan-Tibet Highway between Tongmai and Bomi, and we passed through quickly.

An unclimbed 6000-meter peak of Nyainqentanglha East range shimmered above an old village on the banks of the Parlung Tsangpo and Yi'ong Tsangpo rivers, suggesting mysteries on the edge of the roads and towns. Through a mist of falling rain and snow, the autumn leaves shone in red and yellow hues. On October 26, we arrived at Midoi, now a popular destination for Chinese tourists. High above the 6525-meter mountain of Gensong still awaited a first ascent. In white summit rowers appeared sharp and delicate as a leaf above the glaciers. Our objective, however, was not to climb, but to have a look at the state of ice. We continued on to Rawu, the last town where the PSB allowed us to lodge.





Unclimbed Gemsong 6525m north face and Midoi Glacier viewed from Parlung Tsangpo

At daybreak, we hurried to the Lhagu Glacier. “How much has this glacier been receding in ten years?” This question was a matter of serious concern to us. Indeed, the ice appeared to have shrunk and grown thinner, and a sense of sorrow weighed on us. When I compared my photos from 1999 and 2019, the borders of the Lhagu Glacier had drawn back hundreds of meters. An environmental science professor, Mauri Pelto, later shared his observation that the glacier had retreated 1.2 kilometers since 2001. Local Tibetan inhabitants had also noticed the transformation.

“---We live on the threshold of the hot planet,

The Conquest of nature so often anticipated

or celebrated over the previous two hundred

years appears to be highly ambivalent.”—

Peter H. Hansen, The Summits of Modern Man



North face of Gyalu Peri 7294m viewed from near confluence of Parlung and Yi'ong Tsangpo

On the road from Rawu to high pass of the Dema La 4900 meters, I looked into a magnificent panorama of the heart of Kangri Garpo East. The Indian pundit Kishen Singh (so called A-K) was the first foreigner to traverse the Kangri Garpo Range, back in 1882, during a secret mapmaking mission, when the borders of Tibet were still closed to outside visitors. So much shifted, since the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in the lives of nearby residents: from the turmoil of invasions and political change to the impacts of industrialization and modern climate crisis.

Today, the snows and glaciers will glow in white and blue. But their boundaries seem like the glimmering margins of some transcendent world, one that is growing ever smaller and more precarious. Where I once stood entranced by the glories of unclimbed heights, now I worry more and more about the melting of the ice and uncertainties of the earth's future.

I am eighty-five years old, but I would like to continue my journeys to the borderlands for at least a few years more. In the time remaining to us all, there is still so much felt to see.



Dema La pass 4900m on a road from Rawu to Zayul



Panorama viewed from a road: Rawu~Demala pass, east face

Unclimbed Ruoni 6882m highest peak of Kangri Garpo range (left), climbed Lopchi 6805m (right)



Unclimbed Ruoni 6882m E face, Highest peak of Kangri Garpo range



Lopchin 6808m E face, 2nd highest in Kangri Garpo, climbed by Kobe Univ. in 2009



Unnamed 6280m east face, east of Ruoni, Kangri Garpo



Dojitsenza 5662m east face, Kangri Garpo East



(above) Gheni 6150m (below) Yuhe 6327m N face, Kangri Garpo eastern end



Historical Monastery, Shugden Gompa (reconstructed)



Delpola III 6140m north face, Kangri Garpo



Dinpernalason 6135m south face, Nyainqentanghla East



Unclimbed Tiba Kangri 6846m west face, west of Namcha Barwa 7782m



Lake Basong Tso in autumn



Lhasa city: (above) Lighted up Potala Palace (below) Modern shopping mall